

## **Pacification or Aggravation? The Effects of Talking About Supervisor Unfairness**

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## **PACIFICATION OR AGGRAVATION?**

### **THE EFFECTS OF TALKING ABOUT SUPERVISOR UNFAIRNESS**

Many employees feel a general sense of unfairness toward their supervisors. A common reaction to such unfairness is to talk about it with coworkers. The conventional wisdom is that this unfairness talk should be beneficial to the aggrieved employees. After all, talking provides employees with an opportunity to make sense of the experience and to “let off steam.” We challenge this perspective, drawing on cognitive-motivational-relational theory to develop arguments that unfairness talk leads to emotions that reduce the employee’s ability to move on from the unfairness. We first tested these proposals in a three-wave, two-source field study of bus drivers (Study 1), then replicated our findings in a laboratory study (Study 2). In both studies we found that unfairness talk was positively related to anger and negatively related to hope. Those emotions went on to have direct effects on forgiveness and indirect effects on citizenship behavior. Our results also showed that the detrimental effects of unfairness talk were neutralized when the listener offered suggestions that reframed the unfair situation. We discuss the implications of these results for managing unfairness in organizations.

“A problem shared is a problem halved.” –English Proverb

“A problem shared is a problem doubled.” –David Gemmell

When employees are asked to talk about the experience of working, one recurring theme is a sense of unfairness (Bowe, Bowe, & Steeter, 2001; Terkel, 1974). A number of experiences could give rise to such perceptions, from a biased performance evaluation to an inequitable bonus to a rude or dishonest encounter. Regardless, quantitative studies have revealed that many employees do feel a sense of unfairness toward their supervisors or their employers in general (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Choi, 2008; Holtz & Harold, 2009; Jones & Martens, 2009; Kim & Leung, 2007; Rodell & Colquitt, 2009). Such findings present a key challenge to organizations, given that perceptions of unfairness have been linked to a number of outcomes, including less effective job behaviors, higher turnover intentions, and decreased support for company initiatives (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Choi, 2008; Kim & Leung, 2007; Rodell & Colquitt, 2009).

Not surprisingly, research in the area of communications suggests that employees are likely to talk about unfair experiences with their coworkers. More specifically, employees are more likely to talk about unfair actions from a supervisor than fair actions, with the likelihood increasing the more unfair those actions become (Sias & Jablin, 1995; see also Sias, 1996). The conventional wisdom is that such talking should be beneficial, given that it provides employees with an opportunity to sense-make, seek guidance, and “vent.” Indeed, approximately 90 percent of people endorse the notion that talking through negative events is helpful (Zech, 1999, 2000). Additionally, a series of experiments found that around 80 percent of participants who had just shared negative events agreed that “talking helps” (Rimé, Noël, & Philippot, 1991; Zech, 1999). In a somewhat related stream, experimental work shows that writing about one’s reactions to

unfairness results in increased psychological well-being, fewer retaliation intentions, and a greater sense of resolution (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009). Thus, the consensus seems to be that employees should talk about unfairness with their coworkers, and that such talking should result in important benefits.

Although this consensus is intuitive, we believe it is incomplete and problematic. On the one hand, unfairness talk may have a soothing effect on the talker by increasing feelings of support and validation while providing an opportunity for sense making (Burleson, 1994; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). On the other hand, unfairness talk may prevent the unfairness from retreating into the background. Indeed, it is possible that talking about negative experiences aggravates the situation by bringing negative thoughts into sharper focus (Afifi, Afifi, Merrill, Denes, & Davis, 2013; Costanza, Derlega, & Winstead, 1988; Mendolia & Kleck, 1993; Nils & Rimé, 2012). This notion finds some peripheral support in research showing that rumination—passive and repetitive focus on the negative and damaging features of a stressful interaction (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995)—can result in increased anger and less forgiveness of the perpetrator (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007).

Drawing on cognitive-motivational-relational theory (Lazarus, 1991), we develop theory suggesting that unfairness talk can have an impact on emotions that may hinder employees' ability to "move on" from the experience. Given that supervisors are an especially salient referent for matters of unfairness (Colquitt, Scott, Rodell, Long, Zapata, Conlon, & Wesson, 2013), we focus on supervisor unfairness—with "moving on" captured by forgiveness of that supervisor. As shown in Figure 1, we argue that unfairness talk is associated with more anger about what's already happened and less hope about what's going to happen—both of which can undermine forgiveness. Our focus on anger and hope was inspired by the detailed appraisal

patterns and action tendencies of discrete emotions that are outlined by cognitive-motivational-relational theory.

In addition, we incorporate the potential role that listeners may play in this “moving on” process. Scholars in communications and psychology have suggested that the outcomes of a conversation are influenced not only by the talker, but also by the listener (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Burleson & Planalp, 2000; Horowitz et al., 2001; Nils & Rimé, 2012). However, that research has focused primarily on the resulting strength of the talker–listener relationship. Thus, the literature does not provide insight on how the listener might affect the talker–supervisor relationship. Shedding light on this situation, we theorize that a listener who reframes the talker’s experience and coping options in a positive light will attenuate the negative effects of unfairness talk.

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Our work makes a number of theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, our work represents a mix of theory building, theory testing, and theory extending. We build theory by introducing the concept of unfairness talk to the justice literature. Justice scholars have tended to examine either recipients of unfairness or perpetrators of unfairness without examining the conversational dynamics among employees. This is an important consideration, as scholars have argued that the outcomes of an event itself (e.g., unfairness) may be considerably different from the outcomes that stem from discussing it (e.g., unfairness talk) (Pasupathi, 2001). We test theory by using cognitive-motivational-relational theory (Lazarus, 1991) to understand the appraisal dynamics triggered by such talking, and how those dynamics might influence emotions and subsequent actions. We also extend cognitive-motivational-relational theory by examining

affective states (i.e., hope) and action tendencies (i.e., forgiveness) that it rarely addresses. Taken together, we believe our research will shift the consensus about what scholars understand about unfairness talk, and will yield insights that would not be anticipated from extrapolations of existing work. Practically, we will show that being disinclined to forgive one's supervisor for unfairness has behavioral implications for employees and their supervisors. We will do so by linking forgiveness of the supervisor to citizenship behavior toward the supervisor (Malatesta & Byrne, 1997; Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Including that behavioral outcome answers the call of forgiveness scholars who have theorized (but rarely tested) that forgiveness has practically-relevant outcomes within organizations (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

### THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Before addressing the construct of *unfairness talk*—the extent to which an employee speaks with coworkers about a supervisor's unfairness—it is first necessary to describe the construct of fairness. *Overall fairness* is a global perception of the fairness of a social entity (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; see also Ambrose, Wo, & Griffith, 2015; Colquitt & Rodell, 2015). Our focus on overall fairness was informed by the tendency of lay people to conceptualize fairness in a “holistic, Gestalt-like manner” rather than as a conscious assessment of the adherence to specific justice rules (Ambrose et al., 2015: 110; see also Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Lind, 2001). Additionally, scholars have suggested that overall fairness is the most proximal driver of outcomes, thereby mediating the effects associated with specific justice rules (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005; Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Ambrose et al., 2015; Colquitt, 2012; Colquitt & Zipay, 2015).

Several scholars have suggested that the expectation of fair treatment is a taken-for-granted assumption that receives little attention from employees until they experience a violation

of it (Cropanzano, Stein, & Nadisic, 2011; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Organ, 1990). Given that employees may not give fairness much conscious attention, it is unlikely that they would spend much time discussing fairness with coworkers. In contrast, *unfairness* is a negatively-valenced evaluation that the expectation of fair treatment has been violated (Barsky, Kaplan, & Beal, 2011; Colquitt, Long, Rodell, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2015). Scholars have theorized that this violation creates a sense of uncertainty that employees feel compelled to manage (Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Managing this uncertainty may include talking about it with coworkers. Accordingly, we focused on the dynamics of talking about *unfairness*. In support of our decision, in a study employing content analysis of open-ended comments—which did not prompt participants to provide either positive or negative comments—Jones and Martens (2009) found that 93 percent of the comments were related to unfairness.

Although the concept of unfairness talk is new to the management literature, research in the psychology and communications literatures has addressed the ways in which people might dwell on negative events more generally. These research streams tend to center, in one way or another, on the concept of rumination—defined broadly as a “passive and repetitive focus on the negative and damaging features of a stressful transaction” (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003: 242). Despite the surface similarities between unfairness talk and rumination, there are key conceptual and empirical differences that make it difficult to infer the dynamics of unfairness talk from the dynamics of rumination.

For example, scholars emphasize that rumination is a *passive* coping response that is experienced internally (Skinner et al., 2003; Wade, Vogel, Liao, & Goldman, 2008), whereas talking is an *active* coping response (Rimé, 1995, 2009; Skinner et al., 2003). In their review and synthesis of 100 schemes for classifying coping actions, Skinner and colleagues (2003)

acknowledge this distinction by placing rumination in a separate category from actions involving talking. In addition, empirical support for the distinction between rumination and talking comes from Rimé, Mesquita, Philippot, and Boca (1991), who found that the extent to which participants talked about life events—marital separation, death of a loved one, financial problems, etc.—was not significantly related to their rumination about those events. They concluded, “the fact that an individual shares an emotional experience with others is not predictive of his or her mental rumination about that experience, and the other way around” (p. 457). Rimé, Philippot, Boca, and Mesquita (1992: 250) later opined that these results indicate rumination and talking may “reflect independent processes, each fulfilling its own function in the processing of emotional material.”

Two more specific streams of research on rumination—verbal rumination and co-rumination—do hew slightly closer to unfairness talk because they are active responses. As such, their unique distinctions from unfairness talking deserve further explication. First, research on verbal rumination—centered in the communications literature—has primarily focused on how personal disclosures are beneficial for the talker’s personal well-being and/or the relationship between the talker and the listener (e.g., Afifi et al., 2013; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011; Holmstrom, Burleson, & Jones, 2005; Xu & Burleson, 2001). In an exception to this rule, Afifi et al. (2013) found that verbal rumination increased anxiety immediately after the rumination. However, they found that verbal rumination had no effect on anxiety measured only 15 minutes later. Second, the concept of co-rumination—“discussing problems in a manner that is extreme, repetitive, and speculative” (Haggard, Robert, & Rose, 2011: 29)—captures more extreme-case situations than general talk. This stream of research arose within developmental psychology in an attempt to explain gender differences in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Rose, 2002; Rose,



Carlson, & Waller, 2007). Scholars in this space have explicitly noted that the extreme nature of co-rumination differentiates it conceptually from more general and normative forms of talking about negative events (Haggard et al., 2011; Rose, 2002; Rose et al., 2007; Waller & Rose, 2010). In sum, although prior research on various conceptualizations of rumination provides context for our exploration of unfairness talk, the relationships included in our theoretical model could not be extrapolated from existing literatures.

### **The Effects of Unfairness Talk on Forgiveness**

For justice scholars, the question becomes whether unfairness talk impacts employee outcomes *above and beyond the experience of unfairness*. Unfairness can significantly, and often irreparably, damage the relationship between employees and supervisors (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Brockner, Tyler, & Cooper-Schneider, 1992; Lind, 2001). Justice scholars (Barclay & Saldanha, 2015; Bobocel, 2013; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014) have noted that the key to repairing this damage may be *forgiveness*—an effort to bring an end to feelings of anger and resentment, and replace them with positive feelings and thoughts (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1994; North, 1987; Worthington, 2005). From this perspective, unfairness talk should be seen as beneficial if it facilitates forgiveness and detrimental if it impedes forgiveness.

Our theorizing on unfairness talk and forgiveness draws on an appraisal theory of affect—cognitive-motivational-relational theory (Lazarus, 1991). This theory outlines that emotions stem from a two-stage process consisting of a primary and secondary appraisal. In the primary appraisal, an individual evaluates whether goal achievement has been helped or hindered, with this appraisal determining the coarse positive or negative valence of the emotions. In the secondary appraisal, a more fine-tuned analysis—including some combination of the

impacted goal, the attribution of blame, coping options, and future expectancies—determines the discrete emotions that are experienced. Finally, the emotions that result from this two-stage appraisal process each have corresponding action tendencies that shape the individual's response to the experienced emotions.

Rather than outlining which emotions should be triggered in specific contexts, cognitive-motivational-relational theory provides a framework that allows researchers to understand the dynamics of emotion in a variety of contexts. Indeed, the exact combination of emotions that is relevant in a new context—such as the relationship between unfairness talk and forgiveness—is a conceptual and empirical question (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). Given that the relationships between unfairness talk and both forgiveness and citizenship behavior have not previously been investigated, cognitive-motivational-relational theory does not explicitly list which discrete emotions should be considered. However, the theory does provide detailed appraisal patterns and action tendencies that, when paired with our reviews of the fairness and forgiveness literatures, allow us to build theory around which emotions are relevant. We argue that two discrete emotions—anger and hope—are most relevant to the relationship between unfairness talk and forgiveness of the supervisor.

*Anger* is a feeling of annoyance or displeasure generally stemming from a demeaning offense (Lazarus, 1991). This definition follows a conceptualization first proposed by Aristotle (1941: 1380): “Anger may be defined as a belief that we, or our friends, have been unfairly slighted, which causes in us both painful feelings and a desire or impulse for revenge.”

Importantly, the theory notes that an offense judged to be a threat to one's esteem—a hallmark of unfairness (Colquitt & Zipay, 2015; Tyler & Lind, 1992)—is a component of the appraisal process that is most likely to result in anger (Lazarus, 1991). In contrast, for example, a threat to

one's physical well-being would likely result in the emotion of fright. Scholars have noted that the core secondary appraisal of anger is "other blame"—the belief that goal hindrance can be attributed to another party (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). This blame inherently includes a belief that the other party could have behaved differently—that the offending action was under his or her control (Lazarus, 1991; see also Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Together, the appraisal components of an offense to one's esteem, blame directed toward another party, and focus on a past harm serve to predict anger as a possible emotional response.

Unfairness talk could be characterized as a focus on a past offense to one's esteem. It may center on a recall of past violations that have hindered goal achievement, whether it is a social-esteem goal such a desire to be a valued member of the group or a goal reflecting self-esteem, such as career advancement. Absent cognitive work that prompts a reappraisal, the initial appraisal of the unfairness—a goal-hindering phenomenon that is blamed on the supervisor—should persist. In support of this proposal, experimental research has shown that thinking about an initial appraisal tends to polarize that appraisal (Tesser, 1978). For example, subjects asked to think repeatedly about a disliked person liked him/her less than did subjects who were distracted (Sadler & Tesser, 1973). In a similar vein, unfairness talk should reactivate the appraisals that initially led to the anger. Addressing this issue, scholars have suggested that recall of goal-hindering experiences renews associated feelings, which "tend to be fresh, as poignant and as articulable as they were at the original occasion, or perhaps even more so" (Frijda, 1988: 354).

*Hypothesis 1: Unfairness talk has a positive effect on anger, controlling for perceptions of overall unfairness.*

*Hope* is defined as a yearning for a positive outcome despite having a threatened goal (Lazarus, 1991). It is a positively-valenced emotion that represents the urge "to turn things

around” (Fredrickson, 2013: 4). According to cognitive-motivational-relational theory, a unique feature of hope is that despite being a positive emotion, it can only exist when there is an underlying negative or threatening condition. Hope signals that, despite these unfavorable odds, the individual maintains a positive future expectation (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). Lazarus and colleagues (Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001) have lamented the fact that hope has received less attention from organizational scholars and psychologists than any other emotion, despite being critical to maintaining morale and preventing despair. Our focus on hope in the context of unfairness and forgiveness, therefore, is uniquely suited to extending cognitive-motivational-relational theory.

Unfairness talk may decrease the belief that the supervisor’s unfairness is a surmountable issue. Hope arises from a desire to be in a more positive situation and from a belief that this outcome is attainable (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). In the context of unfairness, hope may signal a belief that a time will come when the unfairness will lessen or stop. It may also represent a belief that the employee’s own actions can facilitate that future. Scholars have suggested that talking makes an experience “more real”—it serves to solidify what was previously a subjective perception (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As employees talk about supervisor unfairness with their coworkers they may be cementing their initial evaluation that the supervisor is unfair. This more “solidified” perception of the supervisor’s unfairness may decrease both the belief that a positive future is possible as well as perceived options for coping with the unfairness. Providing some support for our proposal, experimental research with participants in a depressed mood found that, compared to a control condition, talking about problems out loud into a microphone led to lower optimism (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999).

*Hypothesis 2: Unfairness talk has a negative effect on hope, controlling for perceptions of overall unfairness.*

The increase in anger and decrease in hope that stem from unfairness talk should have important implications for the employee–supervisor relationship. Our predictions are based on the action tendencies for anger and hope that are outlined by cognitive-motivational-relational theory. The action tendency for anger is to attack the person responsible for the offense (Lazarus, 1991). Although the anger generated by unfairness talk could potentially result in a physical or verbal attack against the supervisor, the power dynamics of the relationship suggest that a more subtle manifestation is likely. Cognitive-motivational-relational theory specifically addresses this scenario, noting that the impulse to attack is often experienced internally rather than expressed—especially when the object of the anger is in a position of power. Indeed, Lazarus (1991) argues that employees suppress their anger against superiors to avoid punishment. Given this constraint, anger may manifest subtly as harboring feelings of ill will. This suggests anger will be particularly relevant to forgiveness, given that the release of negative thoughts and feelings is an integral component of forgiveness. In support of our arguments, Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag’s (2010) meta-analysis illustrated that anger was negatively related to forgiveness.

*Hypothesis 3: Unfairness talk has a negative indirect effect on forgiveness of the supervisor through anger.*

The action tendency for hope is approach—a willingness to move toward a goal despite negative circumstances (Lazarus, 1991, 1999; see also Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990). A positive employee–supervisor relationship is key to attaining many work-related goals, including pay, rewards, promotions, and interesting assignments. Hope should foster an approach motivation toward these goals that may manifest as trying to repair or maintain a high-quality relationship

with the supervisor. This approach tendency may also contribute to a tendency to think more favorably about future outcomes. The action tendency of hope is uniquely characterized by the willingness to strive for a positive outcome despite uncertainty and negative circumstances. As hope increases, so too should the willingness to forgive—to release ill will and move forward. Conversely, it follows that a decrease in hope from unfairness talk should have a detrimental effect on forgiveness.

*Hypothesis 4: Unfairness talk has a negative indirect effect on forgiveness of the supervisor through hope.*

### **Moderating Effects of Coworker Responses**

Unfairness talk inherently involves a third party—the listener. Pasupathi (2001; see also Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015) noted that listeners shape the content of discussions in a variety of ways, including being agreeable or disagreeable, being attentive, and providing alternative perspectives. Through this process, listeners shape the interpretations and emotions that are connected to the memory. Although this research has provided insights into the role of the listener, the typical outcomes have been the perceived effectiveness of the message and the resulting quality of the talker–listener relationship (Burleson, 2009; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Holmstrom & Burleson, 2011; Holmstrom et al., 2005). In a review of the literature, Pasupathi (2001) noted that surprisingly little empirical research has addressed how listeners influence talkers’ reappraisals of the subject of the talk. Echoing this sentiment, Jones and colleagues (Jones, Bodie, & Hughes, in press; Jones & Wirtz, 2006) lamented that although communications scholars have theorized that the listener plays a key role in the appraisal of stressful events (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998), these propositions remain largely untested.

Prior research in communications has proposed that listeners' responses can be broadly classified as three points along a continuum of concern for the listener (for a review see Burleson, 2008). Low concern messages are characterized by inattention and unsympathetic dismissals of the talker's position. Medium concern messages are characterized by expressions of sympathy and attempts to distract the talker's attention by raising other topics. High concern messages are characterized by attentional focus on the talker, expressions of condolence, and attempts to "reframe the event within the context of the person's goals, wants, and needs" (Jones et al., in press). Not surprisingly, in a recent review, Burleson (2008) observed that the literature has demonstrated that talkers evaluate high concern messages as more comforting.

Although this stream of literature provides a starting point for our theorizing, scholars in this space have argued that high concern messages are a multi-dimensional construct—including a mix of legitimization, sympathy, passive attention, and reframing. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized without a more "fine-grained analysis" of uni-dimensional response types (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998: 251). Accordingly, we focused our attention on a single response—reframing—that is present across taxonomies in the communications and psychology literatures, and is likely to occur in discussions of unfairness. Our choice to focus on reframing finds additional support in Burleson and Goldsmith's (1998) proposal that whether a message can comfort distress primarily lies in its ability to prompt a reappraisal of the stressful situation. Our focus on reframing also flows from our use of an appraisal-based theoretical lens, thereby allowing us to provide insight into how a third party might influence those appraisals. We note that, given our focus on the effects of unfairness talk with coworkers, for clarity we refer hereafter to the listener as "coworker."

We define a *reframing response* as providing alternative perspectives when the employee talks about the supervisor's unfairness. The core appraisals for anger are that one has experienced a demeaning offense and that another party is to blame (Lazarus, 1991). Reframing is a signal to the employee that the initial appraisals stemming from the unfairness should be revisited. This revisitation provides an opportunity for the employee to incorporate new information and perspectives—supplied by the coworker—into the appraisal process. To illustrate, consider an employee who visits a coworker's office to talk about an unfair supervisor. A coworker who provides a reframing response might note that the supervisor's behavior has not been as unfair as the employee believes or that the behavior has been driven by external factors. A reframing response may also imply that the employee incorrectly attributed blame for the unfairness. The coworker could also identify available solutions, such as meeting with the supervisor to clarify the situation or appealing to senior management.

Scholars have theorized that talkers are motivated to preserve their initial interpretations (Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi & Billitteri, 2015; Pomerantz, 1984). A reframing response likely disrupts the pursuit of that goal. To the extent that a reframing response decreases the perceived threat to a valued goal or decreases the blame attributed to the supervisor, it should attenuate the effect of unfairness talk on anger. This proposal finds conceptual support from communications scholars who have theorized that the only way to change a feeling state is to prompt a reappraisal of the initial event (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Communications scholars note, however, that whether reframing actually does impact a talker's appraisals remains an unanswered empirical question (Jones et al., in press). We propose a reframing response will weaken the impact of unfairness talk on anger and, by extension, its indirect effect on forgiveness.



*Hypothesis 5: The negative indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness of the supervisor through anger is moderated by the coworker's reframing response, such that the effect is weaker when reframing is high than when reframing is low.*

Our theorizing suggests that the coworker's impact on the relationship between unfairness talk and anger is rooted in the coworker's ability to reframe the way employees evaluate past harms. In a similar vein, we propose that the coworker's impact on the relationship between unfairness talk and hope should stem from a reframing of evaluations of future possibilities. The appraisal leading to hope is that a desired goal is threatened and, despite this threat, a yearning exists for a positive future (Lazarus, 1991, 1999). A reframing response implies that actions can be taken to help achieve a positive future, thereby strengthening an employee's yearning. Such an occurrence would mitigate the potentially detrimental effects of unfairness talk on hope.

Additionally, a reframing response is a prompt for the employee to reappraise whether the supervisor's unfairness is truly goal threatening (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Returning to the previous example, a coworker might point out that although the supervisor's unfairness is problematic, goal achievement is still possible. Reframing may also inspire the employee to reassess the likelihood of positive future outcomes and redouble the commitment to succeed despite adversity. Similarly, the alternative solutions raised by reframing may further spur the belief that goal achievement is realistic. In support of this suggestion, Rimé (2009) broadly proposed that reframing provides an opportunity for talkers to reevaluate the extent to which goal attainment has been affected. To the extent that a reframing response increases the employee's belief that desired future outcomes are realistic and spurs a yearning for those outcomes, it should attenuate the detrimental effect of unfairness talk on hope.

*Hypothesis 6: The negative indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness of the supervisor through hope is moderated by the coworker's reframing response, such that the effect is weaker when reframing is high than when reframing is low.*

For organizations, the importance of forgiveness becomes even more apparent when considering how it might impact employee behavior. We are unaware of empirical work that has addressed this relationship, although some recent work has theorized that an organizational climate of forgiveness may contribute to a competitive advantage by creating closer relationships and increasing citizenship behaviors (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). An employee who has ceased negative feelings toward a supervisor should be more likely to go above and beyond his or her defined role to help the supervisor. Additionally, a forgiving employee may be less distracted by negative feelings, making it easier to be attentive to supervisor requests. We propose these dynamics will manifest as citizenship behavior toward the supervisor.

*Hypothesis 7: Forgiveness of the supervisor will have a positive effect on supervisor-directed citizenship behavior.*

## **STUDY 1: METHOD**

We investigated our research questions with bus drivers in seven depots across London, England. This sample provided a relevant context for a number of reasons. First, our discussions with drivers and management revealed some examples of supervisor unfairness. To illustrate, one driver remarked:

“We are treated with contempt.... The customer is *not* always right. We have several managerial staff who can't even drive a car, let alone a bus, try and tell us how to do our jobs. I've been doing this job for almost 15 years and *never* had an accident of any kind. I *never* take time off work, but this is *never* taken into account. But, if I look at someone

sideways I get called into the manager.... I need to get this off my chest and I'm doing it now and I'll share this with other drivers who I value too."

Second, although bus driving is a relatively isolated job, drivers indicated they took advantage of the myriad opportunities to talk to coworkers, including interactions during the start and end of shifts, within-shift route changes, and breaks and mealtimes at the depot. Indeed, one driver observed:

"This job is a solo one at times and it's easy to go for hours without talking to anyone, but when you get the chance with the people you work with I sometimes go hell for leather. Sometimes it's a good release, sometimes it makes no difference."

Another driver echoed this sentiment, noting:

"Supervisors and above berate me and seem unwilling to talk to me because they say I like the sound of my own voice. They give me enough grief and I do talk to the guys I work with about this."

Accordingly, our sample provided a context in which employees both experienced unfairness and had the opportunity to share it with their coworkers.

### **Sample and Procedure**

Our sample included 170 bus drivers from a large private transportation company in London, England operating under the oversight of Transport for London—a government organization. Bus drivers have been used to examine a number of organizational phenomena, including feeling trusted (Baer, Dhensa-Kahlon, Colquitt, Rodell, Outlaw, & Long, 2015), emotional labor (Scott & Barnes, 2011; Wagner, Barnes, & Scott, 2014), and organizational commitment (Angle & Perry, 1981). We note that although the current study was performed in the same transportation company as Baer et al. (2015), it was conducted in entirely different

depots. Thus, none of the employees or supervisors in the current investigation participated in that study. Participants were drawn from seven bus depots located across London. Participants' average tenure with the company was 6.6 years ( $SD = 6.15$ ). Their average age was 44.4 years ( $SD = 10.70$ ). Eighty-nine percent of the participants were male. Employees' ethnicity included White European (37 percent), Black African (24 percent), Black Caribbean (12 percent), Asian (9 percent), Black Other (2 percent), White Other (5 percent), and Other (11 percent).

Data collection took place in three waves. Participants were identified by the company, which provided us with a list of all bus drivers across the seven depots. Eligibility was limited to bus drivers given that the supervisors of the maintenance staff were generally not co-located at the depots with their employees. At Time 1, a member of the research team visited each bus depot to distribute a paper-and-pencil survey to the employees. Multiple visits were made to each depot to ensure that all shifts had an opportunity to participate. This member of the research team remained at each depot while the surveys were completed. The Time 1 survey was distributed to 1282 employees. Five hundred and twenty employees returned the Time 1 survey (a response rate of 41 percent). Employees who participated in the Time 1 survey were entered into a drawing for cash prizes of £50 (\$80), £100 (\$160), and £150 (\$240). Six weeks later, a member of the research team again visited the depots to distribute the Time 2 survey to all employees who returned the Time 1 survey. Two hundred and twenty-six employees returned the Time 2 survey (a response rate of 43 percent). All employees who participated in the Time 2 survey received a voucher redeemable for a snack at the on-site cafeteria (approximately £1.50 [\$2.40] per employee). Respondents and non-respondents at Time 2 did not differ significantly on age, gender, or tenure with the company. There was a small difference in race, as respondents were 37 percent White European whereas non-respondents were 29 percent White European. Moving

beyond demographics, respondents and non-respondents at Time 2 did not differ significantly on unfairness talk.

Six weeks after the completion of the Time 2 survey, we distributed the Time 3 survey to the supervisors of all the employees who returned the Time 2 survey. These supervisors were identified by the general manager of each depot. All twenty-five supervisors who were identified by the general managers participated in the study. Supervisors had worked for the company for an average of 13.4 years ( $SD = 10.08$ ). Their average age was 47.1 years ( $SD = 9.79$ ).

Supervisors' ethnicity included White European (71 percent), White Other (13 percent), Black Caribbean (8 percent), Black Other (4 percent), and Asian (4 percent). We received responses for 214 of the 226 employees (a response rate of 95 percent). After listwise deletion of missing data across the three waves of data collection and two sources, we had complete data for 170 employees.

The Time 1 survey included measures of overall unfairness, unfairness talk, reframing response, and the employee's age. All other demographic variables were obtained from the company's employment records. The Time 2 survey included measures of neuroticism, anger, hope, and forgiveness of the supervisor. The ordering of the measures on both surveys was counterbalanced to prevent item-context effects (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The six-week temporal separation between Time 1 and Time 2 was to limit the possibility that transient sources of common method bias would affect our results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Doty and Glick (1998) argued that temporal separation is one of the most effective means of reducing common method bias, and can be as effective as source separation. A measure of citizenship behavior was completed by the supervisors at Time 3.

## **Measures**

**Unfairness Talk.** As the concept of unfairness talk had not previously been operationalized, it was necessary to create a measure for this study. To create this measure, we followed the construct creation and validation procedure suggested by Hinkin and Tracey (1999; also see Hinkin, 1998). First, we created five items to reflect our definition of unfairness talk. Next, we recruited 115 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk to quantitatively assess the extent to which these five items matched the definition. Participants' average age was 34.3 years ( $SD = 8.43$ ); thirty-six percent were female. The participants were presented with the definition of unfairness talk and asked to rate the extent to which the items matched the definition, using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = *Item is an extremely bad match* to 7 = *Item is an extremely good match*. The mean level of correspondence between the items and the definition was 6.09 out of 7.00, which compares favorably to other uses of this procedure (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014; Gardner, 2005; Hinkin and Tracey, 1999; Rodell, 2013).

At the beginning of the Time 1 survey, employees were asked to write the name of a coworker with whom they talked on a regular basis. The instructions to the unfairness talk measure were: "The questions below ask whether (and how much) you talk with the coworker you identified above when your supervisor is unfair to you (in terms of the treatment and communication you receive, the process used to make decisions, and the decisions themselves)." The five items were: "I talk to my coworker about my supervisor's unfairness," "I share stories with my coworker about how unfair my supervisor is," "I chat with my coworker when my supervisor acts unfairly," "I communicate with my coworker about whether my supervisor is unfair," and "I give my coworker examples of unfair actions by my supervisor." Items were rated using a seven-point scale from 1 = *Almost never* to 7 = *Almost always* ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

**Overall Unfairness.** We assessed employees' perceptions of their supervisor's overall unfairness using Colquitt et al.'s (2015) three-item overall unfairness measure. The items were, "Does your supervisor act unfairly?," "Does your supervisor do things that are unfair?," and "Does your supervisor behave like an unfair person would?" Items were rated using a five-point scale from 1 = *To a very small extent* to 5 = *To a very large extent* ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Anger.** We assessed employees' anger using Watson and Clark's (1994) six-item measure. Sample items included, "Angry" and "Hostile." Employees were asked to reflect on the extent to which they had felt this way in the past six weeks—the temporal separation between Time 1 and Time 2—when thinking about or interacting with their supervisor. Items were rated using a five-point scale from 1 = *Very slightly/Not at all* to 5 = *Extremely* ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Hope.** We assessed employees' hope using Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, and Larkin's (2003) three-item measure. Sample items included, "Hopeful" and "Optimistic." As with the measure of anger, employees were asked to reflect on the extent to which they had felt this way in the past six weeks when thinking about or interacting with their supervisor. The scale anchors were identical to the anchors used for anger ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Neuroticism.** To provide evidence that our hypothesized effects were not driven by individual differences related to our predictors and criterion variables, we included a measure of neuroticism, which reflects the tendency to be moody, hostile, and sensitive to stressors (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Scholars have noted neuroticism has considerable overlap with trait negative affect (Bowling, Hendricks, & Wagner, 2008; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). We used Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, and Lucas's (2006) four-item measure. Sample items included "I get upset easily" and "I have frequent mood swings" ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

**Reframing Response.** We also created and validated a measure of coworker reframing response, following the measure creation and validation procedure recommended by Hinkin and Tracey (1999). First, we created three items to represent the conceptual definition of coworker reframing response. We then used our sample of 115 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk to rate the extent to which the items matched these conceptual definitions. The three coworker reframing response items were: “Encourages me to see both sides of the situation,” “Points out different ways I could interpret my supervisor’s actions,” and “Notes that there are solutions to the problem.” The mean level of definitional convergence was 6.05 out of 7.00. As with unfairness talk, this level of definitional correspondence compares favorably to previous uses of this procedure (Colquitt et al., 2014; Gardner, 2005; Hinkin and Tracey, 1999; Rodell, 2013). In the Time 1 survey, instructions to the measure of coworker reframing response asked employees, “When you talk to your coworker about your supervisor being unfair to you, how often do they do the following?” Items were rated using a five-point scale from 1 = *Almost never* to 5 = *Almost always* ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Forgiveness of the Supervisor.** We assessed forgiveness using McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal’s (1997) Likert-scaled measure of forgiveness. Sample items from the four-item measure included “I wish my supervisor well” and “I condemn my supervisor (reverse-coded).” Items were rated using a five-point scale from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree* ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

**Supervisor-Directed Citizenship Behavior.** We assessed citizenship behavior (Malatesta & Byrne, 1997; Masterson et al., 2000) using four items developed by Malatesta (1995) as an adaptation from Williams and Anderson (1991) (see also Choi, 2008; Liao & Rupp, 2005). Sample items are “Helps you when you have heavy workloads” and “Assists you with



your work (when not asked).” Items were rated using a five-point scale from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree* ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### **Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

To verify the factor structure of our survey measures, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). All variables—unfairness talk, overall unfairness, anger, hope, coworker reframing response, neuroticism, forgiveness of the supervisor, and citizenship behavior—were modeled using item-level indicators. The hypothesized eight-factor model provided a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2(436) = 682.99, p < .01$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = .95; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .06; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .06. The factor loadings averaged .82, and were all significant ( $p < .001$ ). We also tested one alternative measurement model in which the items for unfairness talk and overall unfairness indicated a single factor. This alternative model had a significantly worse fit to the data:  $\chi^2 \text{ diff}(7) = 304.92, p < .001$ .

## **STUDY 1: RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for our variables are displayed in Table 1. Coefficient alphas are located on the diagonal in parentheses.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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### **Tests of Hypotheses**

We tested our hypothesized model—shown in Figure 1—using structural equation modeling within Mplus. As in the confirmatory factor analysis, the variables for overall unfairness, anger, hope, neuroticism, forgiveness of the supervisor, and citizenship behavior

were modeled using scale-level indicators. Following recommended procedures for modeling latent variable interactions, we modeled unfairness talk and coworker reframing response using scale scores as single indicators (Cortina, Chen, & Dunlap, 2001; Mathieu, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 1992). The coworker reframing response was modeled as a moderator according to these recommended procedures. First, we mean-centered unfairness talk and coworker reframing response to remove nonessential multicollinearity between the variables and their product term (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Cortina et al., 2001). Next, we created the product term, which we modeled as a single indicator of the latent product term. We set the error variance for this latent product to  $(1 - \alpha) * \text{variance}$  (Kline, 2011). We calculated the alpha for the product term using the formula proposed by Bohrnstedt and Marwell (1978; see also Cortina et al., 2001; Mathieu et al., 1992). The direct effect from unfairness talk to forgiveness and citizenship was also modeled, as those effects are necessary when testing for indirect effects (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). We controlled for the effects of overall unfairness and neuroticism throughout our model. We also investigated several demographic control variables, such as employee age, gender, race, tenure with the supervisor, and tenure with the organization. None of the demographic controls, however, were correlated with both our predictor variables and our dependent variables. Accordingly, we followed recommended procedures and did not include them in our analyses (Becker, 2005; Carlson & Wu, 2012). Although neuroticism was related to many of the variables in our model, controlling for it did not impact our results. We note that our results are also supported if neuroticism is removed from our model. We have retained neuroticism in our model as it provides some evidence that our effects are not explained by other mechanisms.

On average, each supervisor assessed the citizenship behavior of seven employees. To correct for any potential non-independence that may have arisen from the nesting of employees within supervisors (Bliese, 2000), we analyzed our model using clustered standard errors. This approach clusters employees by supervisor to produce standard errors that have been corrected for non-independence, thus providing a conservative test of our hypotheses. The resulting model provided a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2(300) = 527.80, p < .01$ ; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .07. The standardized path coefficients are shown in Figure 2. Scholars have proposed that directional tests are appropriate when making directional hypotheses (Cho & Abe, 2013; Churchill & Iacobucci, 2010; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013; Schwab, 2005). This approach allows researchers to perform tests that match the hypotheses and to strike a balance between Type I and Type II errors. Accordingly, all significance tests are one-tailed.

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 Insert Figure 2 about here  
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Hypothesis 1 predicted that unfairness talk would have a positive effect on anger. As shown by the significant path coefficient ( $b = .24$ ) from unfairness talk to anger in Figure 2, that hypothesis was supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted that unfairness talk would have a negative effect on hope. As seen in Figure 2, our prediction was supported by the significant path coefficient ( $b = -.25$ ) from unfairness talk to hope. Importantly, unfairness talk had significant effects on anger and hope above and beyond the effects of overall unfairness, even when controlling for neuroticism.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 predicted that unfairness talk would have negative indirect effects on forgiveness through both anger and hope. We tested these predictions using the product of coefficients approach, whereby a significant product of the independent variable  $\rightarrow$  mediator \*

mediator → dependent variable coefficients indicates a significant indirect effect (MacKinnon et al., 2002). Given that the product of two coefficients is rarely normally distributed, scholars have suggested that the significance of the product be tested using the distribution of the product method (MacKinnon, Lockwood, and Williams, 2004). This method has more power and more accurate Type I error rates than traditional tests of indirect effects, such as the Sobel test (MacKinnon et al., 2004; MacKinnon, Fairchild, and Fritz, 2007). Accordingly, we tested the significance of the indirect effects using the Rmediation package within R software (Tofighi & MacKinnon, 2011). The decomposition of the effects of unfairness talk on forgiveness are shown in Table 2. As predicted, unfairness talk had significant negative indirect effects on forgiveness through both anger (-.05) and hope (-.13). Thus, Hypotheses 3 and 4 were both supported.

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 Insert Table 2 about here  
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Hypotheses 5 and 6 predicted that the negative indirect effects of unfairness talk on forgiveness would be moderated by coworkers' reframing response. To test these conditional indirect effects, we utilized the procedure recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007). Their procedure outlines reduced form equations for calculating indirect effects at high and low values of a moderator as well as a bootstrapping technique for testing the significance of those effects. Our analyses employed the equations for what Edwards and Lambert termed "first-stage moderation," given that our moderators affected the independent variable → mediator relationships. Table 3 provides the results of our analyses.

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 Insert Table 3 about here  
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Hypothesis 5 predicted that the negative indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness through anger would be weaker when reframing was high. In support of this prediction, Table 3 shows that the indirect effect was nonsignificant (-.01) when reframing was high and significant (-.08) when reframing was low. The difference between these two effects (.07) was significant. These results are shown graphically in Figure 3. The top-left panel shows that the relationship between unfairness talk and anger is near zero and nonsignificant at high reframing yet positive and significant at low reframing. The top-right panel shows that the indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness through anger is nonsignificant at high reframing yet negative and significant at low reframing. Thus, Hypothesis 5 was supported.

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 Insert Figure 3 about here  
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Hypothesis 6 predicted that the negative indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness through hope would be weaker when reframing was high. Table 3 shows that the indirect effect was nonsignificant (-.05) when reframing was high, and significant (-.20) when reframing was low. There was a significant difference (.15) between these two effects. Figure 3 reproduces these results graphically. The bottom-left panel shows that the relationship between unfairness talk and hope is nonsignificant at high reframing. This relationship is negative and significant at low reframing. The bottom-right panel shows that the indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness of the supervisor through hope is nonsignificant at high reframing. This indirect effect is negative and significant at low reframing. These results support Hypothesis 6.

Hypothesis 7 predicted that forgiveness would have a positive effect on supervisor-directed citizenship behavior. As shown in Figure 2, forgiveness had a significant effect on citizenship ( $b = .23$ ). To provide additional support for our overall model, we also calculated the

total indirect effect of unfairness talk on citizenship behavior through anger, hope, and forgiveness, controlling for the effects of overall unfairness and neuroticism. The total indirect effect (-.09) was significant, indicating that unfairness talk had a negative impact on citizenship, above and beyond the effects of overall unfairness. The direct effect of unfairness talk on citizenship (.01) was nonsignificant.

Taken as a whole, the results of this study contradict the intuitive belief that talking about unfairness should have a soothing and repairing effect on the talker. Instead, our results indicate that talking about a supervisor's unfairness can be detrimental in terms of increased anger and decreased hope—which hinder employees' ability to “move on” from the experience. Moreover, our results suggest that listeners can play an important role in this process, given that they have the ability to mitigate the otherwise detrimental effects of unfairness talk by providing a reframing response to the talker. To further corroborate these findings and to speak to issues of causality between unfairness talk and emotions, we conducted a laboratory study.

## **STUDY 2: METHOD**

### **Participants and Procedures**

One-hundred and five undergraduate business majors from a large, southeastern university were recruited to participate in this study. Of these participants, 40 percent were male, and their average age was 20.22 ( $SD = 0.92$ ). We advertised this study as an investigation of performance and friendship in the workplace, and students were told that they needed to bring a friend or classmate with them in order to participate. For clarity, hereafter the focal participant/student will be termed the “talker” and the friend/classmate will be termed the “listener.” We employed a 2 X 2 design, in which talkers were randomly assigned to a combination of unfairness talk (high or low) and reframing response (high or low).

Upon arrival, the talker and his/her listener were each taken to separate rooms for the first portion of the study. During this time, talkers filled out a survey with personality measures and distractors. Talkers were then provided with an anagram task and told that the amount of extra credit that was awarded would be based on their performance on this task (ranging from 0.5 to 1.5 extra credit points). The experimenter informed the talker that he/she would have five minutes to complete as many anagrams as possible. The experimenter then started a five-minute timer, placed it in front of the talker, and left the room.

When the experimenter returned to the room, s/he created an overall sense of unfairness in a number of ways. First, the experimenter announced that he/she was going to end the task early (after 3.5 minutes had elapsed instead of the promised 5 minutes). Second, upon beginning to grade the anagrams, the experimenter said: “The way I grade these is... Well, never mind. You don’t need to know. It’s not like undergraduates get or care about these things anyway.” Finally, the researcher marked several correctly unscrambled anagrams as incorrect and informed the talker that he/she would only receive partial credit as a result. This exchange therefore violated rules that cut across all the various justice dimensions (Colquitt, 2001).

At the same time, in a separate room, one of the experimenters trained the listener to help create the study conditions (high/low unfairness talk and high/low reframing response) during subsequent interactions with the talker. This design is modeled after studies in psychology and communications that examine the effects of talking (e.g., Afifi et al., 2013; Nils & Rimé, 2012). Listeners were given specific instructions about their randomly-assigned condition, and were provided with time to read through examples and discuss how to enact their role with the experimenter. Despite the detailed information provided about the manipulations, listeners did

not receive any information about the dependent variables, thus leaving them blind to the study hypotheses.

For the next portion of the study, an experimenter took the listener into the talker's room and instructed the pair to complete an art task while talking about their day. This relatively unstructured time provided an opportunity for the talker to talk about the unfairness that had been created by the experimenter. The listener used this time to administer the manipulation (high/low unfairness talk and high/low reframing response) as trained by the experimenter. As it was important to ensure that the talkers remained blind to the study hypotheses, each dyad was under surveillance through a video camera by an experimenter during the entirety of the session. None of the listeners "broke character" or revealed the topic of the study to the talkers.

Listeners in both the high and low unfairness talk condition asked the talker two basic questions: "How was your word jumble?" and "Do you think the researcher graded it fairly?" In the high talking condition, they were taught to encourage further conversation with questions such as "What do you mean?" Thus, all talkers had an opportunity to talk about the unfairness. In the low talking condition, however, listeners were told not to ask any follow-up questions and to respond in such a way that would discourage further conversation about the unfairness (e.g., "Oh," or "Uh-huh"). Importantly, we employed a *low* talking condition rather than a *no* talking condition, as some level of talking was necessary to provide an opportunity for the listener to reframe in the high reframing condition.

Listeners also followed instructions about whether to reframe the talkers' unfair experience and reactions in a more positive light. In the high reframing condition, listeners provided alternative explanations, such as "Maybe s/he is having a bad day" or "Maybe s/he is overworked," that could help reframe the situation. Actual examples of reframing from listeners



in the study included: “I’m sure it wasn’t purposeful,” “Maybe she’s just having a rough day and you did better than you think,” “Maybe you can ask her afterwards to like give you more credit or something,” and “Maybe she’ll like feel bad for you and give you more credit.” In the low reframing condition, listeners were instructed to avoid sticking up for the experimenter or presenting the situation in a more positive way.

After the talker and listener had ample time to talk (approximately 10 minutes), experimenters took the listeners back to their individual room, separated from the talker. Listeners were asked to report on the extent to which talkers seemed to experience particular emotions during the course of their conversation. Those emotions included hope, anger, and a number of other distractor emotions.

Meanwhile, talkers were given a set of three instructions to conclude the experiment. First, they were asked to complete a reaction survey about the art task. Second, they were given an envelope and were told that it contained evaluation forms requested by the college’s research pool administrators, who were performing a quality control check on the lab study process. This evaluation asked talkers about their entire research pool experience, including rating their experimenter as well as other research pool representatives and procedures. To enhance realism, this form was printed on a distinct letterhead and talkers were instructed to seal their anonymous evaluation in the provided envelope and submit it in a marked, locked box. In reality, we used this form to assess talkers’ forgiveness of the experimenter. Third, the experimenter referenced the art supplies strewn around the room and noted that talkers could, if they chose, pick up the room as a favor to the experimenter before leaving. Later, once the experiment was concluded, the experimenter rated the degree to which the room was cleaned up on a scale from one to five. This served as the measure of citizenship behavior.

As talkers exited the room, experimenters told them that there was actually one additional survey that they needed to fill out. That survey included the manipulation checks for the unfairness talk and reframing response manipulations. After that survey was completed, experimenters debriefed the talkers and listeners regarding the need for deception and the true nature of the study. All talkers received the maximum amount of extra credit, as well as a \$5 gift card. Listeners also received a \$5 gift card.

### **Measures**

**Anger.** As in Study 1, we assessed talkers' anger using the six-item PANAS-X scale developed by Watson and Clark (1994). Sample items included, "Angry" and "Hostile." Listeners rated the talkers' anger using a response scale ranging from 1 = *Very Slightly/Not at All* to 5 = *Extremely* ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Hope.** We assessed talkers' hope using the same three-item measure as in Study 1 (Frederickson et al., 2003). Sample items included, "Hopeful" and "Optimistic." Listeners rated talkers' hope using a response scale ranging from 1 = *Very Slightly/Not at All* to 5 = *Extremely* ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Forgiveness.** Forgiveness was assessed with the same measure used in Study 1 (McCullough et al., 1997), but was adjusted so that the experimenter was the target of forgiveness. Items included phrases such as "I wish the experimenter well." The response scale ranged from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Manipulation checks.** We verified our manipulations using the unfairness talk and reframing response measures used in Study 1. Their coefficient alphas were .93 and .92, respectively.

## **STUDY 2: RESULTS**

## Manipulation Checks

We used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine whether our manipulations were effective. Talkers rated conversations in the high unfairness talk condition as having more talking than the low unfairness talk condition ( $F = 8.88, p < .01; M = 3.56$  vs.  $3.01$ ).

Additionally, talkers rated the conversation in the high reframing response condition as higher reframing than the low reframing response condition ( $F = 16.77, p < .01; M = 2.94$  vs.  $1.99$ ).

## Hypothesis Testing

As in Study 1, we tested our hypothesized model—shown in Figure 4—using structural equation modeling with Mplus. This model provided a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2(109) = 209.40, p < .01$ ; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .09; SRMR = .06. The unstandardized path coefficients are shown in Figure 4.

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 Insert Figure 4 about here  
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Consistent with Study 1, the effects of unfairness talk and emotions were supported. The path coefficients from unfairness talk to anger ( $b = .51$ ) and unfairness talk to hope ( $b = -.78$ ) were both significant, supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2. Likewise, the negative indirect effects of unfairness talk on forgiveness through anger ( $b = -.17$ ) and hope ( $b = -.14$ ) were also significant, supporting Hypotheses 3 and 4 (see Table 4).

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 Insert Table 4 about here  
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Hypotheses 5 and 6 predicted that these negative indirect effects of unfairness talk on forgiveness through anger and hope would be weaker when reframing was high. As presented in Table 5, the indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness through anger was significant in the

low reframing condition (-.17), but not in the high reframing condition (-.07). The difference between the two effects was not significant (.10). Thus, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

However, the indirect effect of unfairness talk on forgiveness through hope was significant in both the low reframing condition (-.14) and the high reframing response condition (.05). The difference between these two effects was significant (.19), supporting Hypothesis 6. Figure 5 presents these results graphically.

In addition, as in Study 1, the effect of forgiveness on citizenship behavior ( $b = .37$ ) was significant, supporting Hypothesis 7. Finally, providing further support for the overall model, the total indirect effect of unfairness talk on citizenship behavior was negative and significant (-.24). The direct effect of unfairness talk on citizenship behavior (.19) was nonsignificant.

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 Insert Table 5 and Figure 5 about here  
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## **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

It is understandable that employees talk to their coworkers about their supervisor's unfairness. Unfairness is discomforting. An unfair supervisor can cause employees to question their value to the group and their ability to achieve desired outcomes. Talking with coworkers provides employees with an opportunity to make sense of that unfairness—to create a solidified understanding of the situation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Talking is also an opportunity to connect with others or “blow off steam” (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975; Cohen & Willis, 1985). Accordingly, it is intuitive that employees would believe that “talking helps.” Empirical research supports that consensus, revealing that most people endorse the notion that talking through negative events is helpful (Zech, 1999, 2000).

Our results challenge this consensus in several ways. First, our studies show that talking increases anger—an emotion that may impede the ability to “move on”—while decreasing hope—an emotion that can motivate action while guarding against despair (Fredrickson, 2013; Lazarus, 1999). Importantly, these effects are present when controlling for perceptions of overall unfairness and neuroticism. Second, our study shows that these generated emotions can make it difficult for the employee to forgive the supervisor, which may be a critical step in recovering from unfairness (Barclay & Saldanha, 2015; Bobocel, 2013; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014). Third, our study shows that coworkers play a significant role in determining the emotions that stem from unfairness talk. Indeed, coworkers who supply alternative perspectives attenuate the harmful effects of unfairness talk. Finally, we showed that the decrease in forgiveness caused by unfairness talk can ultimately have adverse effects on the employee’s helpful behavior toward the supervisor. In sum, when it comes to valuable, behavioral outcomes, talking can hurt.

We believe our findings shed light on the dynamics of unfairness talk in ways that could not be extrapolated from existing research. Research supporting the “talking helps” consensus has generally examined outcomes a short time after the social sharing (for a review see Rimé, 2009; also see Afifi et al., 2013; Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Additionally, this research—which is predominantly experimental—has focused on sharing specific events rather than on generalized appraisals. This focus of the existing literature made it difficult to draw conclusions about how unfairness talk—a holistic evaluation—might affect ongoing relationships. Our theoretical lens of cognitive-motivational-relational theory allowed us to investigate these relationships in a manner that exposed the potential outcomes of unfairness talk. By supplementing the oft-examined emotion of anger with hope—a rarely examined emotion in organizational research (Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001)—we were able to extend the theory in important ways.

Primarily, we showed how the action tendencies of hope manifest as potentially critical outcomes like forgiveness and citizenship behavior.

Given the generally detrimental effects of unfairness talk, how can organizations address these issues? Our findings should be particularly salient for employees. By talking about unfairness they may be unknowingly exacerbating its already substantial ill effects. Given the natural inclination to talk about unfairness (Bowe et al., 2001; Jones & Martens, 2009; Terkel, 1974) and the benefits that may accrue from receiving coworker support (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Cohen & Wills, 1985), a self-imposed moratorium on unfairness talk seems unlikely and ill-advised. Rather, we suggest that employees should pay particular attention to *whom* they talk to about unfairness. Previous research indicates that talkers often prefer a validating response to a reframing response (Pasupathi, 2001; Pomerantz, 1984). Yet, our results indicate that a reframing response may be what is needed. Accordingly, employees could take an active role in addressing unfairness, explicitly asking coworkers to chime in with alternative perspectives. If coworkers are aware that the employee's goal is to "move on," the likelihood of a productive response should increase.

Notwithstanding the apparent benefits of reframing, we suggest coworkers exercise caution in their reframing attempts. Communications researchers have noted that reframing is distinct from responses that convey a simple "move on" or "get over it" (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998; Holmstrom et al., 2005). Indeed, although these messages might contain an element of reframing—that the unfairness was "not so bad"—the message also may convey a lack of concern and a dismissal of the talker's perspective. Research has uniformly shown that responses with those undertones are perceived as unhelpful (Burlison, 2008). Effective reframing likely

conveys concern for the talker while also encouraging the talker to recognize the available coping options (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Jones & Wirtz, 2006; Rimé, 2009).

Despite a robust literature on forgiveness, the impact of forgiveness on performance had not previously been established. Research on forgiveness within other fields has generally focused on intra-individual outcomes such as state affect, self-esteem, physical and mental health, and subjective well-being (for reviews see Barclay & Saldanha, 2015; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Organizational research has focused on similar outcomes or has tended to treat forgiveness as the terminal outcome (e.g., Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Bobocel, 2013). Although these outcomes are important concerns in their own right, by identifying a relationship between forgiveness and citizenship our research will hopefully increase the attention that organizations place on helping employees address supervisor unfairness. Potential approaches include training supervisors to improve conflict management skills, enrolling employees in forgiveness interventions, providing reparations for the unfairness, and engaging in expressive writing about the unfairness (Barclay & Saldanha, 2015).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Additional research is needed to unpack the dynamics of unfairness talk. Although our results showed that talking ultimately has detrimental effects on the employee–*supervisor* relationship, communications research indicates that talking should improve the employee–*coworker* relationship (for a review see Afifi et al., 2013). As employees talk with their coworkers they may perceive higher levels of social support, which has been meta-analytically shown to increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Future research could investigate the extent to which these benefits offset the detriments. Relatedly, coworker response types may have very different effects on the employee–coworker

relationship. Reframing may be seen as an undesired response that degrades the employee–coworker relationship. Indeed, employees may prefer responses that focus on validating their perspective—an outcome which is indicated by communications research (Burleson, 2008). The response type, therefore, may affect the likelihood that the employee will share with that particular coworker in the future. Given the impact of employee–coworker relationships on job-related attitudes and behaviors (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), understanding these dynamics is an important consideration.

Considering the negative effects we found for unfairness talk, future research could examine ways in which talking could be productive. In their experimental research, Barclay and Skarlicki (2009) found that expressive writing about injustice was beneficial when participants wrote about both their emotions and their thoughts. Experiments that distinguish between talking about emotions and thoughts related to unfairness could shed additional light on this phenomenon. Moreover, this research could incorporate coworker responses—a dynamic that is not present in expressive writing. This research would uncover whether a structured approach to unfairness talk might have a more beneficial outcome. For example, employees who explicitly focus on obtaining alternative perspectives from their coworkers might see an increase in forgiveness and job performance.

## **Limitations**

Our research design in Study 1 encompassed two sources and three waves of data collection that were each separated by six weeks. This combination of source and temporal separation decreased the likelihood that our results were subject to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The relationships between anger, hope, and forgiveness of the supervisor could have been subject to some inflation, however. An ideal design would have



included four waves of data collection. Additionally, we did not capture all variables during each wave of data collection. A true panel design would have allowed us to support the presumed causality underlying our hypotheses more persuasively in the field study. We note that our replication of these effects in a laboratory study does allow us to speak to these issues, given that experimental manipulation and random assignment are the most powerful method for establishing causality and controlling for alternative explanations (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Thus, our two-study approach helps address the weaknesses inherent in both field and laboratory studies, thereby providing evidence of both external and internal validity.

Another potential limitation is that our field sample was primarily male. Traditional stereotypes suggest that women are more likely than men to talk about their problems with others (Bergmann, 1993). However, a multitude of field and experimental studies have found that gender has negligible or nonsignificant main and moderating effects on the propensity to talk about negative experiences (Luminet, Bouts, Delie, Manstead, & Rimé, 2000; Rimé, 2009; Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998; Rimé et al., 1992). Indeed, the mean of our unfairness talk variable in the field study showed that the phenomenon was fairly common. Additionally, a meta-analysis found that gender was not related to forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010), suggesting that our gender homogeneity may not be relevant to that portion of our model.

## **Conclusion**

It is unlikely that our results will lead employees en masse to stop talking about their supervisor's unfairness. After all, there are immediate, short-term benefits of talking, which include helping the employee to make sense of the situation and to feel the support of coworkers. Hopefully, however, our results will lead employees to also consider the long-term effects that talking may have on the employee-supervisor relationship. This consideration should lead

employees to more thoughtfully select with whom they speak, and in what way. Speaking with coworkers who are likely to reframe may, in the long run, bear more fruit. Additionally, being aware of the performance benefits of forgiveness may lead employees to make a more conscious effort to “move on.” As employees take an active role in responding to unfairness, benefits should accrue to all involved parties, including the organization.

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**TABLE 1****Study 1: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics <sup>a</sup>**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>
1. Unfairness Talk	3.01	1.70	(.97)							
2. Overall Unfairness	2.59	1.15	.51*	(.92)						
3. Anger	1.65	0.95	.32*	.32*	(.96)					
4. Hope	2.95	1.31	-.21*	-.19*	-.14	(.95)				
5. Reframing Response	3.05	1.06	.32*	.05	.07	.10	(.92)			
6. Employee Neuroticism	2.37	0.85	.26*	.27*	.32*	-.29*	.03	(.79)		
7. Forgiveness of the Supervisor	3.62	0.69	-.42*	-.39*	-.37*	.50*	-.08	-.45*	(.68)	
8. Supervisor-Directed Citizenship Behavior	2.95	0.75	-.14	-.21*	-.05	.17*	.01	-.07	.19*	(.85)

<sup>a</sup> N = 170. Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal.

\*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

**TABLE 2****Study 1: Effect Decomposition Results <sup>a</sup>**

<b>Effects of Unfairness Talk on Forgiveness of the Supervisor</b>	
Indirect effect through	
Anger	-.05*
Hope	-.13*
Direct effect	-.21*
Total effect	-.38*
<sup>a</sup> N = 170.	
* $p < .05$ , one-tailed.	

**TABLE 3**

**Study 1: Conditional Effects of Unfairness Talk Through Anger and Hope  
at High and Low Levels of Reframing Response <sup>a</sup>**

Mediator	Effects on Forgiveness of the Supervisor		
	Indirect	Direct	Total
Anger			
High Reframing Response	-.01	-.21*	-.22*
Low Reframing Response	-.08*	-.21*	-.29*
Difference	.07*	.00	.07*
Hope			
High Reframing Response	-.05	-.21*	-.26*
Low Reframing Response	-.20*	-.21*	-.41*
Difference	.15*	.00	.15*

<sup>a</sup> The high and low values of Reframing Response were 1 (one SD above the mean) and -1 (one SD below the mean). Moderation for the relationships occurred at the first stage (Edwards & Lambert, 2007).

\*  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

**TABLE 4****Study 2: Effect Decomposition Results <sup>a</sup>**

<b>Effects of Unfairness Talk on Forgiveness</b>	
Indirect effect through	
Anger	-.17*
Hope	-.14*
Direct effect	-.33*
Total effect	-.65*
<sup>a</sup> N = 105.	
* $p < .05$ , one-tailed.	

TABLE 5

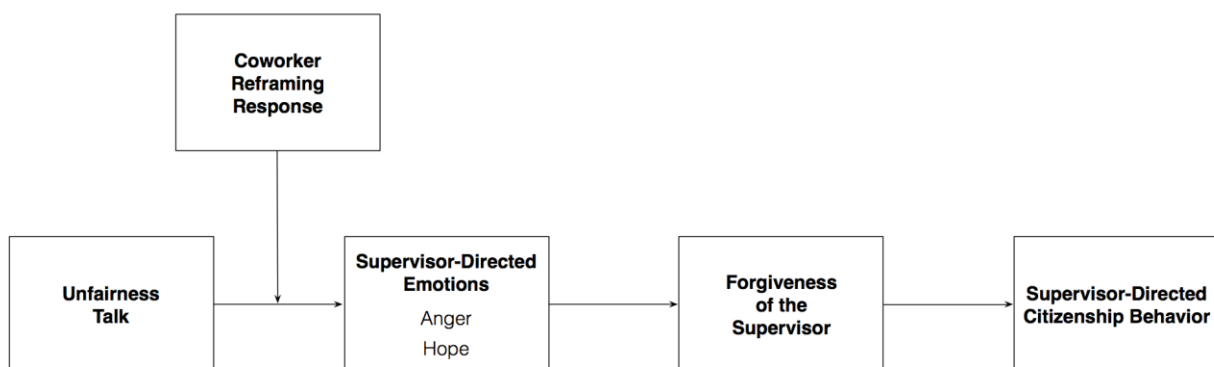
**Study 2: Conditional Effects of Unfairness Talk Through Anger and Hope  
at High and Low Levels of Reframing Response <sup>a</sup>**

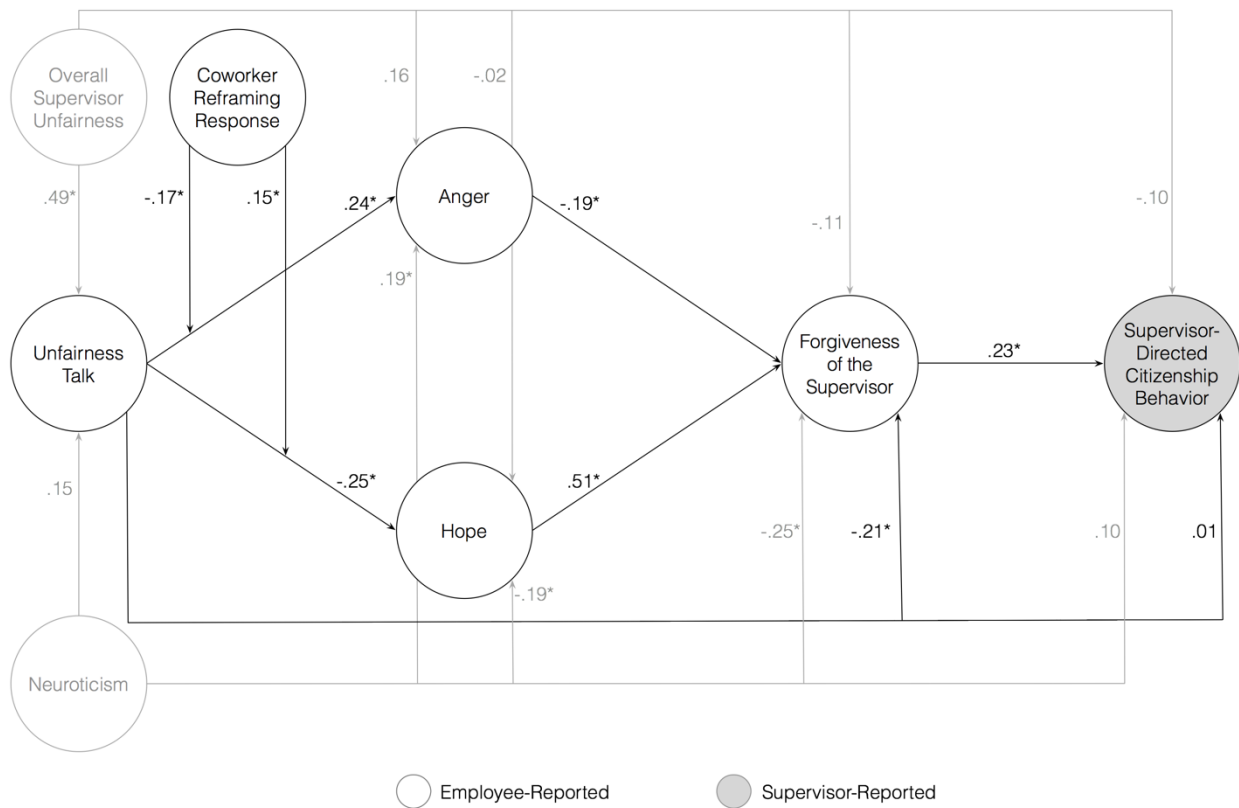
Mediator	Effects on Forgiveness		
	Indirect	Direct	Total
Anger			
High Reframing Response	.07	-.33*	-.40*
Low Reframing Response	-.17*	-.33*	-.50*
Difference	.10	.00	.10
Hope			
High Reframing Response	.05*	-.33*	-.28*
Low Reframing Response	-.14*	-.33*	-.47*
Difference	.19*	.00	.19*

<sup>a</sup> The high and low values of Reframing Response were 0 and 1. Moderation for the relationships occurred at the first stage (Edwards & Lambert, 2007).

\*  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Theoretical Model**



**FIGURE 2****Study 1: Structural Equation Modeling Results <sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> The direct effects from the moderator to anger and hope were included in the analyses but are omitted from the figure: coworker reframing response → anger = -.11; coworker reframing response → hope = .26\*.

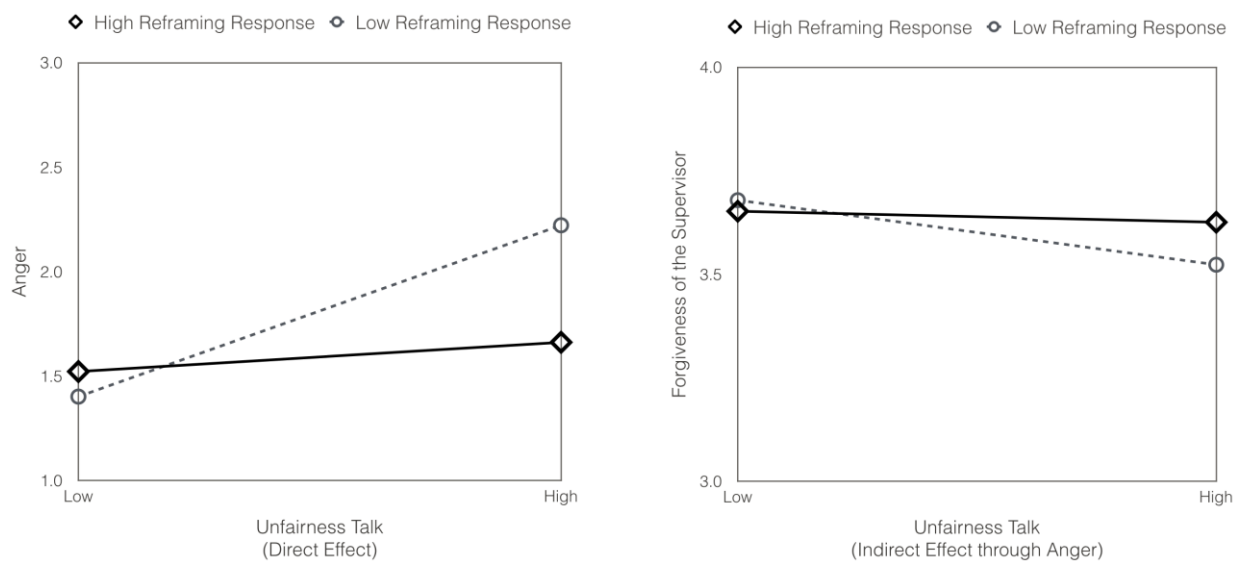
\*  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.



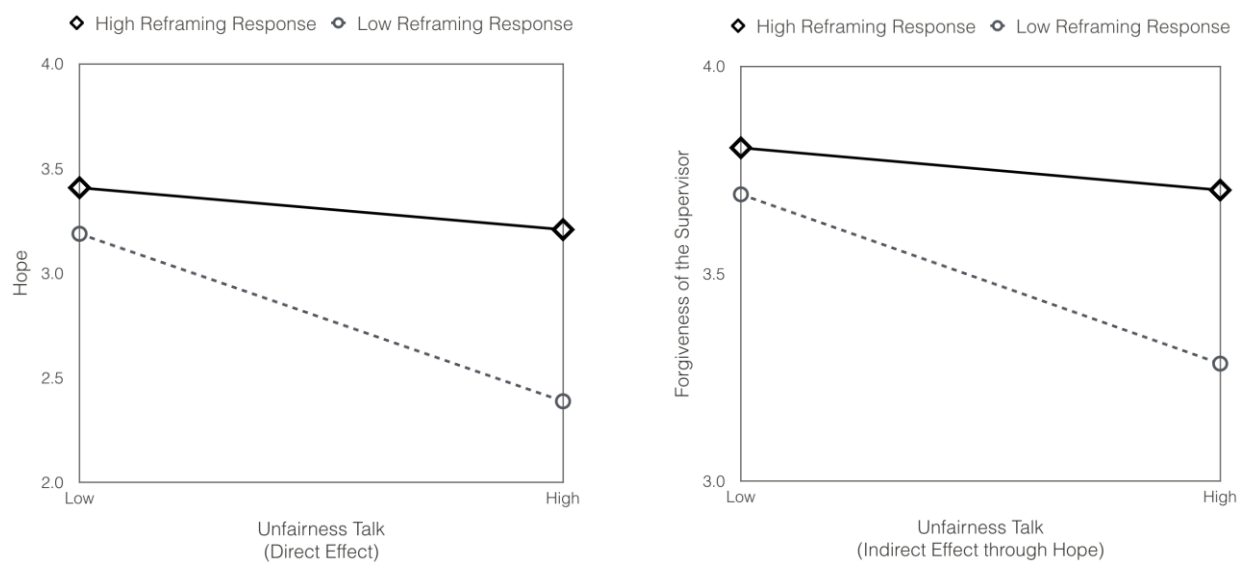
**FIGURE 3**

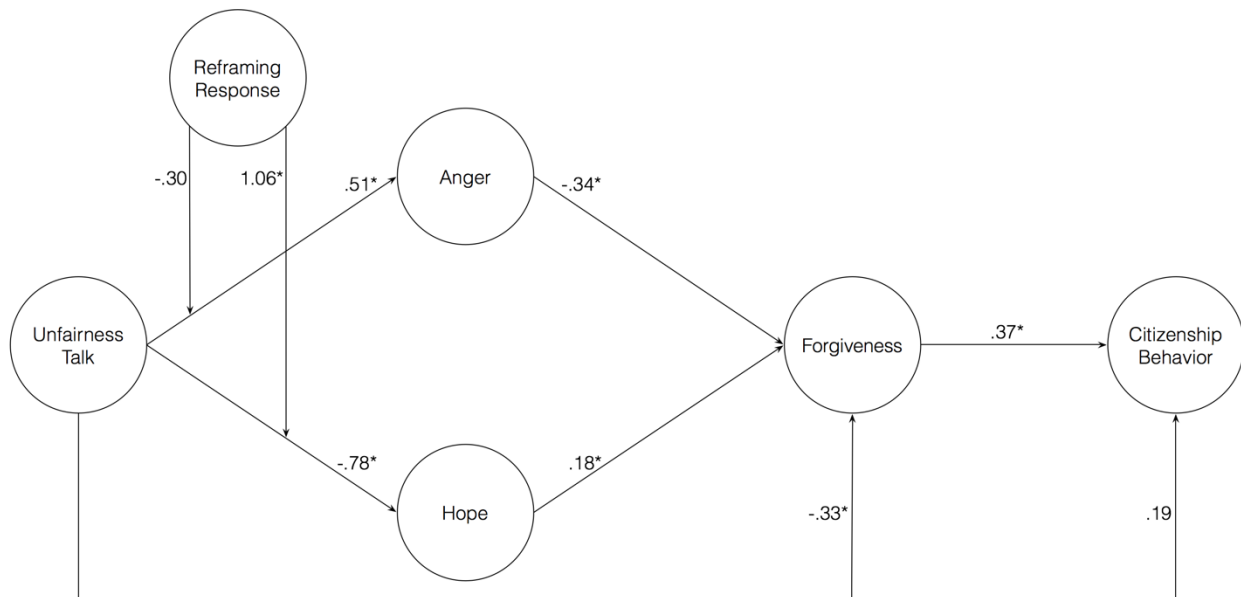
**Study 1: Moderating Effects of Reframing Response on  
Direct and Indirect Effects Through Anger and Hope**

**Anger**



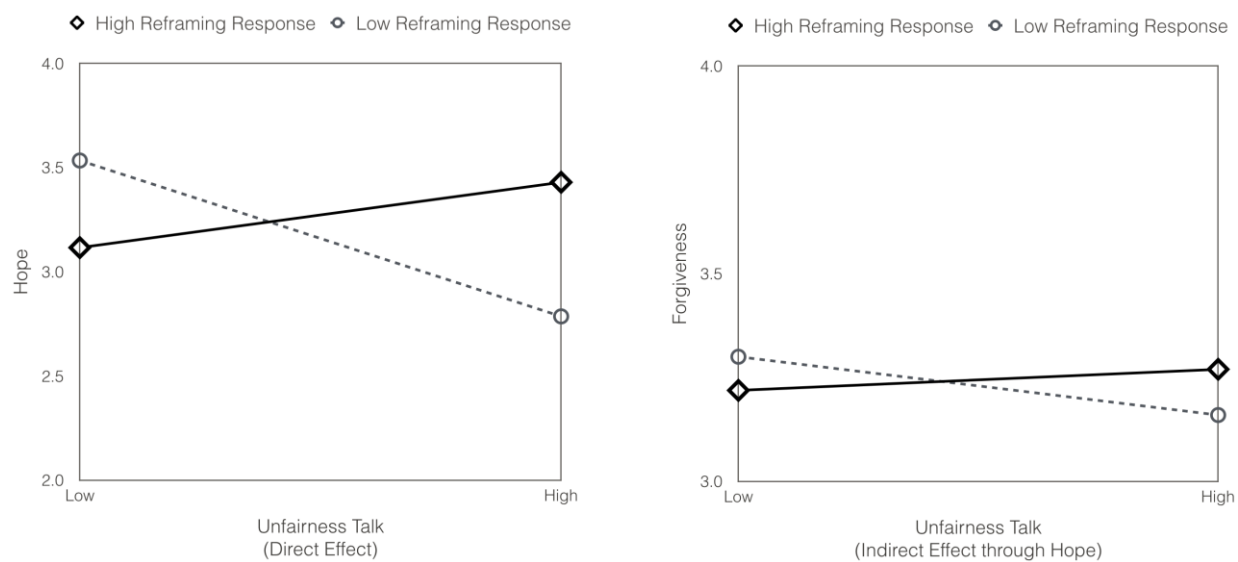
**Hope**



**FIGURE 4****Study 2: Structural Equation Modeling Results <sup>a</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> The direct effects from the moderator to anger and hope were included in the analyses but are omitted from the figure: coworker reframing response  $\rightarrow$  anger =  $.18$ ; coworker reframing response  $\rightarrow$  hope =  $-.45^*$ .

\*  $p < .05$ , one-tailed.

**FIGURE 5****Study 2: Moderating Effects of Reframing Response on  
Direct and Indirect Effects Through Hope****Hope**

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